

Opponent Testimony for House Bill 322
Elizabeth Kenyon, Professor of Social Studies Education, Kent State University
State and Local Government Committee
September 22, 2021

Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chairwoman John, Ranking Member Representative Kelly,
and Members of the State and Local Government Committee,

Thank you for receiving my written testimony. My name is Elizabeth Kenyon.

I come today writing in strong opposition to House Bill 322

I come as a citizen, a social studies educator and as a parent of children who attend public schools in Ohio. While I am on the social studies education faculty at Kent State, I am not speaking on behalf of Kent State University, but as someone who through my profession, through my life experiences, and through my parenting believes this bill will have a negative impact on all of us living in the great state of Ohio.

First, let me share a bit of my personal story. I grew up in a small, mostly white town in the Midwest like so many of the places I have come to know in Ohio. I was a devout Christian who believed strongly in God's love for everybody and in the need for a more just world. From this belief I also had a strong sense of fairness as a child and wanted to do all I could to make the world a better place.

As a young child I was fortunate to have a mother who became passionate about issues of justice, largely through trainings she received through her workplace. As a result, she made sure that early on I started to learn about racism, classism and sexism. She gave me books like *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor. She took me to concerts by Sweet Honey in the Rock, an African American activist women's singing group, she took me to a Sojourner Truth re-enactor at the local

college. This early understanding of racism was crucial in my ability to develop friendships with people of all races in my school and fostered in me a desire to learn and grow more.

After graduating from college, I spent time working in a youth crisis shelter in Washington DC where I learned even more about the impacts of systemic racism. I also saw how racism impacted the kids I worked with every day, how it squashed their creativity, rendered their genius invisible and deeply limited their ability to thrive.

After I received my teaching degree, I returned to Washington, DC to teach for three years. Nearly all of my students and most of my colleagues were Black. The only reason I was able to build any trust in these settings is because I had learned and continued to learn about racism in all of its forms. I was able to recognize it when it happened, teach about it in my classes, and see the ways it impacted my students. While I am still not an expert on race or racism, the learning I had done and my willingness to learn more were all vital to my work in this context. Furthermore, it allowed me to make invaluable friendships with people of many different races, genders, etc. These friendships have enriched my life in innumerable ways giving me access and knowledge of different ways of being, experiencing joy, expressing ideas and emotions and so much more. My life would be so much less had I not engaged in what at times is difficult learning and had I not had the opportunity to immerse myself in communities different from those I grew up in.

This willingness to learn about difference, to learn about systemic power, to learn about discrimination, has been so important to my current work as a professor of social studies education in which I prepare future teachers. I draw on this learning every day to connect with students, support them in their own learning, and prepare them to build the kind of trusting relationships with their future students that will create the best possible learning environment. I have seen my students connect across differences with each other, and with students in their field placements, because of these difficult conversations and the learning they do.

And to be clear, I never do most of the things addressed in this bill. I never tell my students that they are racist just because they are white, I never hold up one race, gender, ethnicity, or nationality over another. I never tell my students that they are responsible for what people have done in the past. However, we do talk about the ways in which racism has existed historically and how it exists today in systems, laws, media, society and education. We talk about how this will impact their future students and what they can do to ensure that every student in their classroom feels a sense of belonging, and of being valued for all of who they are.

As a social studies educator, I also talk with my students about the power of citizenship, the fact that we can take a role in making our communities, our state, and our nation the best they can be. We celebrate what we have and we also consider where we can improve. Without taking an honest look at our history and at our present, we cannot strive for something better.

Finally, I speak to you as a mother. One of my kids is already a first grader in one of Ohio's many great public schools and the other will soon be a kindergartener. Based on my own life experience, I want for them to be able to have the rich friendships and connections that I was able to grow up with. I also want them to learn about ways in which the color of their skin benefits them and how their peers who are not white may experience the world. I want them to have a full understanding of history with all of its victories and failings.

As a state and a nation we must have the strength to look under the hood, to look at those faulty beams in our foundation, so that we can become better, so that all our lives can be more rich, more whole. We are not fragile, we are strong. And as the land of the free and the brave, we must be courageous enough to do this work and aspire to be even better than we already are.

Again, as a citizen of Ohio, as a social studies educator and as a mother, I urge you to oppose HB 322.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions or provide additional information.

Respectfully Submitted,

Elizabeth Kenyon

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